U.S. Department of Education
Race to the Top Assessment Program
Reviewer Selection Process

Call for Reviewers

On February 26, 2010, the Race to the Top Assessment Program Team invited two groups of individuals to serve as application reviewers for the Race to the Top Assessment competition. Invitations to apply were sent to: 1) The list of potential expert panelists for the RTTA public meetings, who were nominated by the Board on Testing and Assessment director, the U. S. Department of Education's National Technical Advisory Council (NTAC) chair and/or Department staff, and 2) persons experienced as peer reviewers in the Title I review of state assessment systems (all recruited on the basis of assessment and/or consortium management or governance expertise). The invitation included a request that the recipient share the application information with individuals they thought met the qualifications.

Individual applicants were asked to send a cover letter, a completed copy of the Peer Reviewer Information Checklist, and a curriculum vita to a designated email box (racetothetop.assessmentreview@ed.gov).

Applications were originally due on March 31, 2010; however the application deadline was extended to April 12, 2010 to ensure that the applicant pool was large enough. During the early part of April, outreach calls were made to everyone on the "list of potential expert panelists," reminding them of the revised deadline. Institute of Education Sciences staff identified individuals in their peer reviewer pool with expertise in assessment and emailed letters of invitation to them. By April 12, 2010, the Department had received 81 peer reviewer applications, and the application process was closed.

Reviewer Selection Process

There will be one Race to the Top Assessment review panel that will consist of nine non-Federal employee reviewers. Program staff anticipated that it needed up to 20 reviewers (including alternates) for the competition. The process for selecting reviewers was developed and implemented in collaboration with the Program Team and the OGC Ethics Team, and was approved by the Leadership Team.

Step One (1): Establish list of applicants.
Program staff finalized the list of applicants it received by the April 12, 2010 deadline and entered contact information for all reviewer applicants into a database created for this purpose. Program staff provided peer reviewer applicants with written expectations including dates for the review, information on conflict of interest screening, and confidentiality requirements. The Department's contractor also provided program staff with the results from internet searches for each applicant.

Step Two (2): Screen for expertise, experience, and potential conflicts of interest
Applicants were instructed to provide a completed checklist of skills and experience along with a current curriculum vita and cover letter describing their relevant experience. As applications were received, they were examined for information indicating a direct conflict of interest as determined by the OGC Ethics Division. Program staff then used the *RTTA Reviewer Applicant Rating Scale* to record the degree of experience indicated in the application materials. [Note: The information gathered using this rating scale helped to inform the selection of reviewers, but did not result in an applicant not being reviewed in Step Three.]

Step Three (3): Reviewing for Expertise by Senior Staff
The Department convened a group of three senior career staff and three senior political staff to review the applications of all individuals who had complete applications. Senior staff participating in this review had expertise in assessment and knowledge of experts in the field. Using the qualifications outlined in the invitation for potential reviewers plus knowledge of a candidate's performance in the field, applicants were rated as either "1-exceptional," "2-good," "3-acceptable" or "4-unacceptable." Everyone categorized as a "1" or "2" was placed on a Preliminary Candidates List.

Step Four (4): Reviewing for Prior Experience with Program Offices
The Preliminary Candidates List from Step 3 was shared with program offices that frequently use peer reviewers for their competitive grant competitions. These offices included the Student Achievement and School Accountability Office within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, the Office of Innovation and Improvement, the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, and the Institute of Education Sciences. Each office was asked to identify individuals who have reviewed applications for their offices in the past and did a thorough job, and to identify individuals they would not recommend to be a peer reviewer. One reviewer was removed based on these recommendations.

Step Five (5) Final Conflict of Interest Check for Final Peer Reviewer List
For each applicant on the Preliminary Candidates List, program staff and OGC's Ethics Division analyzed the candidates' resumes, answers from the conflict of interest form, and information about the candidates from internet searches. Based on a review of this information, candidates were (a) cleared, (b) contacted by phone to clarify responses to questions; (c) deemed to have an indirect conflict of interest for which a waiver could be granted; (d) deemed to have an indirect conflict or the appearance of a conflict of interest for which a waiver could not be granted; or (e) deemed to have other circumstances that might create the appearance of a conflict of interest. Individuals cleared to serve and available for all required elements of the review were included in the Final Peer Reviewer Pool. Individuals who were deemed to have conflicts of interest for which a waiver could not be granted were contacted by phone to explain the conflict and told they could not review for the Race to the Top Assessment competition.

Step Six (6): Approval by Program Team and Leadership Team
Based on the reviews by program staff (Step Two), senior staff (Step Three), program offices (Step Four), and the results of the conflict of interest review (Step Five), program staff presented the Final Peer Reviewer Pool to the Program Team for their review and approval. From that list, the program team created the Final Peer Reviewers List. This final list included approximately twice as many reviewers as were expected to be needed for the review in order to account for attrition due to conflicts of interest that may occur but cannot be fully determined until applications are submitted, and due to any changes in the reviewers' availability. The Final Peer Reviewers List was then presented to the Leadership Team for their review. The list did not change as a result of this step.

Step Seven (7): Issue Letters of Invitation
Program staff emailed letters of invitation to individuals on the Final Peer Reviewers List and invited them to secure travel arrangements. Included with the letter of invitation was an agreement from the Department through which the reviewers acknowledged the need for integrity in the review process, confidentiality with respect to their role as a peer reviewer, and understanding of the conflict of interest review and requirements. By accepting the invitation to participate in the peer reviewer orientation meeting, reviewers agreed to abide by the reviewer guidelines in order to protect the integrity of the peer review process, ensure a level playing field for all applicants, avoid bias, and eliminate potential or real conflicts of interest in fact or appearance. The letter stated that at any time, if the Department determines that there is a conflict of interest, the reviewer will be excused from service.

Step Eight (8:) Contact Individuals Not on the Final Reviewers List
Program staff emailed letters informing individuals who were not on the Final Reviewers List that their services would not be needed, but noted that they may be contacted in the future to review for other Department grant competitions.

Step Nine (9): Verification that no Reviewers are Debarred or Suspended
The program office submitted the Final Peer Reviewer List to the OESE front office for verification that no reviewers appear on any debarred or suspension lists and for approval of the list of reviewers.

Step Ten (10): Responding to Conflicts of Interest and Changes in Availability
The Department expects that some reviewer attrition will occur after invitations are extended (Step Seven) due to conflicts of interest or changes in availability. For instance, some conflicts of interest may occur but cannot be fully determined until applications are submitted and we know which States are applying. In cases where conflicts of interest arise, the Competition Manager will contact the reviewer and excuse him/her from serving on the panel.

Step Eleven (11): Selection of the review panel
Members of the Program Team and Leadership Team will select which individuals in the Final Reviewers List will serve as active reviewers and which will serve as alternate reviewers.

Reviewer Guidelines

At a minimum, reviewers are required to agree to the following guidelines:

1) Reviewers must commit to participating in all required trainings.
2) Reviewers will attend and participate in all panel discussions.
3) Reviewers must review and score independently all applications assigned to them and evaluate each application based solely on the selection criteria and priorities.
4) Reviewers will provide constructive written comments that fully justify the scores assigned.
5) Reviewers must consider only the information in the application to assign points to the selection criteria and may not introduce other materials. Reviewers are to use only the contents of the application (as provided by program staff) to make decisions about the scores and comments submitted. Reviewers are prohibited from using outside information (such as that found in Web searches) to make a determination about the scores and comments submitted for an application. Reviewers will not access Web links included in applications, as this could constitute outside information.
6) The reviewers assigned to each Race to the Top Assessment application are exclusively responsible for decisions related to the scoring of these applications. (Program staff, including panel monitors and the competition manager, will not provide reviewers with evaluative guidance on the content of their comments or the accuracy of their scores beyond guidance necessary to ensure that reviewer comments clearly address the scoring criteria and justify the reviewer's scores.)
7) If at any time during the review process, a reviewer becomes aware of a conflict of interest (either actual or perceived) with an application he or she is reviewing, the reviewer must notify the panel monitor and/or competition manager immediately of this conflict.
8) Reviewers will review applications only in secure, non-public locations in order to protect the confidential content of applications.
9) Reviewers will not discuss applications, the review process, or other information to which they are given access based on their role as a reviewer at any time outside of when it is necessary in

order to fulfill their official capacity as a reviewer (i.e., reviewers will only discuss the content of applications in the panel discussion room while the designated panel monitor is present).

10) At no time during the competition will reviewers communicate with representatives of the media, applicants, or others outside of those designated by the program staff, until they have received explicit, written permission from the Department to do so.

11) Reviewer comments and scores will be released publicly.

12) The names of all peer reviewers (including alternates who attend reviewer training) will be released publicly at the end of the competition.

13) Reviewers will sign a confidentiality agreement and an individualized conflict of interest report before accessing applications.

14) Applications are to be read and reviewed only by the peer reviewers assigned to them by the Department. Reviewers are prohibited from sharing the content of an application or the application's appendices with anyone outside of the designated review panel or designated program staff.

Honoraria

Reviewers will receive an honorarium of $5,000 for their services. Reviewers who serve as alternates will receive different amounts depending on their situation:

- Alternates who read applications and attend the on-site review will receive an honorarium of $5000

- Alternates who provide scores and comments for all applications but do not attend the on-site review will receive an honorarium of $4000.

- Alternates who attend the training session but who are not needed to score and comment on applications will receive $500.

Honoraria for peer reviewers or alternates will not be distributed until the completion of the panel review.

Travel, Lodging and Per Diem

The Department will reimburse reviewers for their travel, lodging, and per diem expenses for any applicable portions of the review that require travel. Reviewers will be reimbursed for these expenses soon after their travel is completed.